J.W. Patterson's role in success at UK is matter of little debate

BY DOTTIE BEAN
HERALD LEADER EDUCATION WRITER

Meet J.W. Patterson. The J.W. stands for nothing.

"I have no name," said Patterson, the University of Kentucky's director of debate. "The way that came about was my parents disagreed over what to name me — one wanted Jason Wallace, and the other wanted Jackson William."

"So the doctor said, according to my mother, 'Why don't I just put the initials down, since we have a year to change it?'"

"But they never got around to it."

"Oddly enough, I accepted UK's offer because it was the best offer I had that didn't require me to coach debate."

J.W. PATTERSON
UK director of debate

In 1960, when Patterson came to the University of Kentucky, he wasn't interested in working with college debate teams.

It was a time-consuming job requiring a lot of travel. And Patterson was interested in research.

"Oddly enough, I accepted UK's offer because it was the best offer I had that didn't require me to coach debate," he said.

In spite of that, Patterson has spent much of his working life since 1971 as director of UK's debate program. It has flourished under his long tenure, building steadily on its national reputation.

The most recent team was ranked first in the country heading into the national tournament earlier this month, but it lost in the..."
PATTERSON:
Debate director puts UK on top

FROM PAGE B1
quarterfinals.

UK debaters have won several national championships and have
collected more than 100 first-place
tournament trophies in 20 years.

And a driving force behind it
all has been Patterson. He has
spent countless hours on the road
route to tournaments, has orga-
ized UK’s own tournaments and
has run workshops for high school
debaters.

His personal style, somewhat
flamboyant and eccentric, inspires
loyalty among friends and many
former debaters — although some
say it can be frustrating for those
who work with him daily.

Once coach as well as director,
Patterson’s role now is more that of
administrator, recruiter and pubil-
cist. Since 1984, the coaching duties
have fallen to Assistant Director
Roger Solt, described by one com-
petitor as “one of the smartest
people in the game today.”

But it is Patterson’s name and
personality that many still asso-
ciate with the debate program as
an institution at UK.

Some describe him as outspo-
ken and argumentative, others as
gregarious and fun-loving.

His knowledge and wide-rang-
ing tastes in music are well-known
in debate circles. For long road
trips, he makes tapes from a large
collection of compact discs and has
been known to play them loud.

One infamous tape contains 40
to 50 versions of “Amazing Grace.”

Solt, who drives Patterson and
the debate teams to tournaments,
said the efforts are not always
embraced by debaters, who com-
plain that their director “inflicts a
bit more on them than they actual-
ly like, particularly when it comes
to country music, which isn’t too
popular among students on the
team.”

“I must say,” Patterson says
ruefully, “some of my debaters
have somewhat closed minds on
music.

“I can appreciate a lot of things
they like, but they can’t appreciate
a lot of things I like.”

That doesn’t keep top debaters
away, though. Even among critics
and rivals, Patterson gets respect
for being able to attract top-notch
debaters, and students to UK.

“His strengths are in recruit-
ing,” said Harvard debate Coach
Dallas Perkins. “The rest of the
world is constantly amazed at how
he gets such talented students to
go to Kentucky.”

Solt said he thinks Patterson’s
greatest skill has been as an insti-
tution builder,

“When he took over in 1971,
Kentucky had had a strong pro-
gram, but it was not nationally
competitive.

“By the third year under his
direction, Kentucky was in the
semifinals of the national debate
tournament,” Solt said. “That
shows how quickly he turned it
around.”

Some say his ability to wheel
internal and external support for
the program and operate it on a
shoestring travel budget borders
on performing an administrative
miracle.

Patterson became well-ac-
quainted with the administrative
side of the university early in his
career.

After about four years of teach-
ing at UK, he was tapped by
incoming UK President John Os-
wald to move into his office as an
assistant and help organize the
university’s yearlong centennial
celebration in 1965.

He spent 3½ years as special
assistant in the president’s office.
He said he had no idea why he
was picked for the centennial job.

“It was something I didn’t seek
and tried to turn down several
times.”

Patterson said Oswald found it
appalling that UK was barely a
year away from its centennial cel-
bration and very little had been
done toward planning it.

The celebration kicked off in
1965, complete with then-President
Lyndon B. Johnson as speaker.

With the turmoil over Vietnam
beginning to surface, Johnson was
turning down a lot of invitations to
speak on college campuses, but
former Gov. Edward T. Breathit
persuaded him to come to the
Kentucky celebration, Patterson
said.

Patterson moved out of the
president’s office and back to the
classroom in 1965. That same year,
he also took on the duties of faculty
adviser to UK’s Student Com-
ment Association, a position
holds, and in 1971 he took
position of director of debate

The assignments left t
as much time as he had h
pursue the scholarly inter
brought him to campus in f
place, Patterson said.

But over the years, P
has found time to be co-a
debate textbook, Contempo-
rates, with Northwestern Un-
Communications Dean Dan

He still uses the text i
ing an undergraduate clas
ment and debate.

He said he tries to insti-
cation for debate’s logical-
processes in all his studen

But it’s easier worki
debaters, he said, because
already appreciate what
does for their critical thinki

J.W. Patterson
Birthdate: May 9, 1928
Birthplace: Stillwell, Okla.
Current positions: UK director of debate, faculty adviser
Student Government Association, professor of communications
Education: Worked toward combined degree at Northeast Okla-
ma University and the University of Oklahoma, where he maj-
in speech and journalism; master's degree in speech, University
Michigan; doctorate, speech communications, University of Okla-
ma
Quote: “The success we’ve had, I would attribute to the qualit-
the debaters ..., and to good assistants, particularly Roger Solt,
I’ve been lucky in having good administrative support for
program.”

T.A. MCKINNEY
former UK debater

“He’s interested in things young people are interested in
subscribes to things like Spin and has a large music
collection with hundreds of CDs, including rock and
r groups.”
From his cluttered office on the outh floor of Patterson Tower, Patterson can see a campus landmark, the statue of James Kennedy Patterson, an early UK president.

A gilt-framed portrait of the same Patterson hangs on the wall along with posters of Bob Dylan, Emmylou Harris, Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson, framed photographs of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, various plaques and a sign that reads, 'Never trust a man who doesn't drink.'

Was President Patterson perhaps an ancestor?

Patterson hedges. When he first arrived at UK, he was frequently asked, and he denied kinship.

But when he went home to the family farm near Stillwell, Okla., his father vehemently claimed kinship. "Since then I've said if my father says we are, that's fine with me."

Over the years, he has also built up a reputation for generosity and loyalty to his debaters and to the program.

"He would do anything for those debaters," said former debater Ouida Papka. "If you're having problems or need money to stay in school, he will find scholarship money or some way to help."

Papka said Patterson and Salt have also been known to bear many debate team expenses out of their own pockets.

Patterson also acts as academic shepherd, said former debater T.A. McKinney. "He knows what people are capable of and sees that they don't lose sight of getting good grades."

McKinney, now a law student at Columbia University's law school, said when Patterson recruited him as a UK debater, he promised that McKinney could move into a top-flight law school from UK.

His first-semester grade-point average was about a 3.75, McKinney said.

"Dr. Patterson said, 'You need to bring that up a bit,'" he said. McKinney graduated with a 3.93.

McKinney said Patterson is able to adapt to young people. "He's interested in things young people are interested in. He subscribes to things like Spin and has a large music collection with hundreds of CDs, including rock and rap groups."

Patterson said he tries to stay up on today's musical genres and include what's currently popular in a library that ranges from classical Baroque to Hank Williams and George Jones.

"I like to hear new types of music. Not all the stuff that is new turns out to be good, but I like to at least give it a hearing."

Patterson's class on argumentation and debate attracts a mixed group of students, ranging from pre-law students who need debating skills to those who are taking it to fulfill a university communications requirement.

This leads to a mixed range of interest in the class and mixed results, Patterson said.

During a 1-hour-and-15-minute class on the logical duties of the affirmative, several students briefly shut their eyes and appeared to doze off.

Failing to get a quick response from one student whom he asked to recount the four questions the affirmative side is expected to answer in a policy debate, Patterson told the class members to close their books.

Time for a pop quiz, Patterson said.